



The Bard's Journey to the "Small time" in China

by David Li Jun

The phrase "small time/small-time", in a general sense, means "operating on a small scale, second-rate, unimportant, insignificant" (OED). As for the term "small-time Shakespeare", it was coined by Christy Desmet in *Shakespeare and Appropriation*, referring to "individual [Shakespearean] acts of 're-vision'" from local, more pointed responses to the Bard" and with "motives ranging from play, to political commitment, to agonistic gamesmanship" (1999: 2-3). This coinage was in contrast to a previous term, "big-time Shakespeare", employed by Michael Bristol (1996) to denote the institutionalization and appropriation of Shakespeare that, in Desmet's words (1999: 3), "serves corporate goals, entrenched power-structures, and conservative cultural ideologies". Drawing upon this terminology, Alexander Huang describes "small-time Shakespeare" as the type of Shakespeare production that is "adapter/actor-centered" and "autobiographical", involving "individual engagements or reframings of Shakespeare's plays that reaffirm local and even personal interpretations" (2004: 204, 206).

In light of Desmet and Huang, this paper attempts to further explore the dimensions of "small-time Shakespeare" in a contemporary Chinese context (referring to the mainland in particular). Recognizing the relevance of Desmet's discussion of "small-time Shakespeare" in the West and insights from Huang's examination of "small-time Shakespeare" in a "Chinese-speaking" (especially Taiwanese) context, the author firstly clarifies that this paper focuses on the recent situation in Mainland China,



more precisely the last 15-20 years. Thus contextualized, the term “small-time Shakespeare” in question mainly refers to Shakespearean productions that are not official or institutionalized, i.e., not dependant on or manipulated by the government and not oriented for political or ideological purposes.

Based on this term, the author’s argument is that Shakespearean performances in China have been undergoing a journey from the “big time” (official, institutionalized and centralized) to the “small time” (non-official, non-institutionalized and decentralized) since the 1990s. Apart from the “autobiographical” Shakespeare that features, according to Huang, “individuality” and “artistic subjectivity”, the author is keenly concerned with another noteworthy dimension of “small-time Shakespeare” – the “anthropological”, a term interpreted by Stephen Purcell to mean “plural”, “inclusive”, and “encompassing” (2009: 10-11). So far as the current reception of Shakespeare in China is concerned, it is arguable that the “anthropological” better meets the demand and expectation of ordinary Chinese audiences than the “autobiographical”.

1. BACKGROUND

As Chinese critic Hai Ma 海马 pointed out, there has been a fundamental change in Chinese theatrical productions: “from official, elitist, top-down moralizing to non-official, popular, and entertaining” (2012: 54). This has also proved true in Shakespearean productions, with the Bard’s journey from the “big time” to the “small time” in China determined by two major social-economic and cultural conditions:

1) The transformation from a planned economy to a market economy

Following the route of Reform and Opening-up since 1978, a milestone document, *zhonggong zhongyang guanyu jianli shehuizhuyi shichang jingji tizhi ruogan wenti de jue ding* 中共中央关于建立社会主义市场经济体制若干问题的决定 (Decision on several issues concerning establishing a socialist market economy) was passed at the Third Plenum of the Fourteenth Communist Party of China (CPC) Congress in Beijing in 1993, which officially marked China’s epochal transformation from a planned economy to a market economy. Consequently, the field of art and culture, formerly tightly controlled by the government and CPC, has undergone a process of marketization. Previously, theatres in China were reputed to have the highest degree of institutionalization in the world (Hai 2012: 54); the vast majority of theatrical productions, including Shakespearean performances, were typically “big time”, with the two government-subsidized and organized Chinese Shakespeare festivals (1986 and 1994) being representative examples. Marketization and structural reform gave rise to many unprecedented phenomena, such as little theatres, freelance theatre practitioners, and independent theatre studios, the growth of which provided rich soil for small-time Shakespeare.



2) The establishment and flourishing of popular culture

The 1990s witnessed a shift from “high culture fever”¹ in the preceding decade to popular culture frenzy in China, reflecting a trend of “disenchantment”² with two dominant cultures from the past: the “revolutionary culture” based on a personal cult of the Chairman in the Mao era (1949-1976) and the elitist culture based on a utopian ideal of an elite enlightenment in the post-Mao era (particularly in the 1980s). As a result, a dominant, monologic, and centripetal Culture gradually gave way to more diverse, dialogic, and centrifugal cultures and a “grand narrative” was replaced by a “small narrative”. With regard to dramatic performances, the increasing expansion of popular culture created more areas and channels where artists might circumvent government constraints. Despite the inveterate influence of the “zhu xuanlu (Main Melody)”,³ cultural practitioners are finding more license and space in the “non-official” culture which is accepted or even supported by the government. A telling example is Zhou Libo,⁴ a famous stand-up comedian in Shanghai who audaciously breaks into the “forbidden zone” of speech, playfully commenting on sensitive issues such as the Cultural Revolution, the Party’s propaganda methods, and the idiosyncratic behaviors of state leaders and high-ranking officials.⁵ This playful application of

¹ This term is borrowed from Wang Jing’s *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng’s China* (1996).

² According to scholar Tao Dongfeng, there had been two “disenchantments (pinyin: *qumei*; Chinese: 祛魅)” in Chinese literature/culture since the beginning of New Era: the first against Mao’s “proletarian revolutionary” literature/culture and the second against the elitist one (2008: 1-6). By “disenchantment”, Tao does not refer to its original sense concerning religion as used by Max Weber (“the disenchantment of the world”), but in its derivative meaning, implying a process of dissolving “a monolithic, authoritative sublimity that relies on some semi-religious or non-religious forces and builds on the basis of a series of exclusive dualism” (Tao 2008: 1).

³ The Chinese term *Zhu xuanlu* 主旋律 basically refers to artistic works which deal with uplifting topics so as to inspire and educate people to praise the Party and Socialism. With evolution over the past couple of decades since its coinage after 1989, this term may now be loosely used for any artistic work which *positively* reflects the history, achievements, or culture of China and the bright side of society. The term may be translated in different ways as main melody, main theme, or main tune. The author adopts the translation of “main melody” by Bettina S. Entell (2002: 75-77). Also, to justify the use of this translation, the author found the term *Zhu xuanlu*, which like many other political jargons in Chinese, is vaguely flexible and too subtle to be exactly and concisely translated into one English word or phrase, and thus decided to translate it literally, purposely leaving the English translation as somehow awkward as the Chinese original.

⁴ Zhou Libo 周立波 is a Chinese stand-up comedian. On December 1, 2006, he made his first special performance in Anfu Road, Shanghai. In late 2008, Zhou Libo created his own stand-up comedy called “Shanghai Style Small Talk” (pinyin: *hai pai qing kou*; Chinese: 海派清口) which includes *A Laughable Talk on the Past 30 Years* and *A Laughable Talk in Big Shanghai*. Zhou frequently makes commentary upon urban life, economic and political issues <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zhou_Libo> (30 July 2017).

⁵ For example, Zhou banters three previous top leaders – Mao, Deng, and Jiang – imitating how they would react to one of China’s embassies being bombed: Mao would ask, “How many [nuclear-armed] missiles do we have in store?” The answer: “Two hundred.” Then Mao would command, “Use all of them to attack the enemy!” Deng, in the course of playing bridge, would say in his strong Sichuan



popular culture devices to fulfill one's political commitment is not uncommon in stage performances, and Shakespeare has often provided another shield to doubly ensure the safety of the artist. For example, the characterization of Malvolio dressed in a Chinese tunic suit⁶ in *Twelfth Night* (1993)⁷ remains a fresh and poignant caricature of a kind of self-professed elitist still oddly clad in the old ideological mantle.

Furthermore, popular culture today is no longer under effective control by any one segment of society. Unofficial or grassroots forces have started to use this accessible channel to demonstrate their social and political stances. A potent example is *Super Voice Girls*,⁸ a TV talent show in which viewers were able to participate in the judging process by sending text messages to vote for their favorite contestants.⁹ This standard entertainment programme format was acclaimed as "one of the largest democratic voting exercises in mainland China,"¹⁰ which has blazed "a trail for cultural democracy".¹¹ Another interesting example is the 2008 shanzhai¹² Spring Festival gala

accent, "Use thirteen [nuclear-armed] missiles to attack its surrounding regions first." While the third leader would thus order, "We must make sure no [nuclear-armed] missile should be released, otherwise it would be hard to explain to the international society. Today's 'soft' is for tomorrow's 'hard'; today's 'bent' is for tomorrow's 'straight'..." <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OnVrbCM3944>> (30 July 2017).

⁶ The modern Chinese tunic suit is a style of male attire traditionally known in China as the Zhongshan suit 中山装 (after Sun Yat-sen, also romanized as Sun Zhongshan), and later as the Mao suit (after Mao Zedong). Sun Yat-sen introduced the style shortly after the founding of the Republic of China as a form of national dress although with a distinctly political and later governmental implication. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mao_suit> (30 July 2017).

⁷ This refers to *Twelfth Night* produced by the Central Academy of Drama, directed by Liu Libin 刘立滨 and He Bingzhu 何炳珠 in 1993. An in-depth examination of this production is included in the author's PhD thesis entitled "Popular Shakespeare in China: 1993-2008" available at <<http://repository.lib.cuhk.edu.hk/en/item/cuhk-327651>> (30 July 2017).

⁸ Also called *Super Girl* (pinyin: *chaoji nvsheng*; Chinese: 超级女声), an annual national singing contest in People's Republic of China for female contestants, organized by Hunan Satellite Television between 2004 and 2006. The final episode of the 2005 season was one of the most popular shows in Chinese broadcast history, drawing over 400 million viewers, more than the China Central Television New Year's Gala earlier that year. The final peaked at 280 million viewers at a given time, dwarfing the 12-million-viewer figure for the finals of *Pop Idol*. <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Super_Girl_\(contest\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Super_Girl_(contest))> (30 July 2017).

⁹ During the 2005 regional contest in Chengdu alone, 307,071 message votes were cast for the top three contestants, each vote costing 0.5 to 3 yuan. See <<http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2005%2D08>> (30 July 2017).

¹⁰ Yardley, Jim. "An unlikely pop icon worries China." *International Herald Tribune*. <<http://www.ihf.com/articles/2005/09/04/news/super.php>> (30 July 2017).

¹¹ For example, Wang Zhengxu believes this program reflects that a Chinese characteristic civil society is coming into being. ("Chaonu zhong de fensi yu gongmin shehui 超女中的粉丝与公民社会" (Fans of Super Girls and Civil Society), <<http://www.cc.org.cn>> – 30 July 2017); another web critic interprets the soul of Super Girls as "freedom, people-friendly, and unaffected beauty", and the progress of this program as "having indirectly returned to freedom in speech via freedom in entertainment" ("Chaojinusheng de sanda linghun he liangda weixie 超级女声的三大灵魂和两大威胁" (Three Souls and Two Threats of Super Girls) <<http://www.cc.org.cn/2005/9/7/>> – 30 July 2017).

¹² Literally, *shanzhai* 山寨 means "a bandit stronghold in the mountain". In Cantonese, *shanzhai* also means "not standard or legitimate"; Hong Kong people often scorn some small underground



which parodied China Central Television (CCTV)'s annual gala, an established national ritualistic observation of the Chinese Lunar New Year's Eve since 1983. This semi-satirical event, organized by an ordinary Beijing native, caused a significant stir by challenging the status of CCTV and sending the message that the era of official monopoly on culture was at an end. It is worth noting that the Internet played an integral role in both above-mentioned examples. In point of fact, the Internet, with its proliferating and expanding functions, is challenging and undermining almost all "big-time" establishments, as suggested by the success of a series of inventions sharing the name "micro", such as micro blog,¹³ micro novel, micro movie, etc.

2. AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SHAKESPEARE

The term "autobiographical" is used by Alexander Huang to examine a new theatrical phenomenon that emerged in the 1990s in Chinese-speaking regions, especially in Taiwan. As he suggests, the concept of "autobiographical" overlaps with that of "small time", in that both stress personal/individual and local traits. Despite the fact that Huang's discussion is Taiwan-centric,¹⁴ it is also applicable to my topic on "small-time" Shakespeare in Mainland China. Evidently, "personal" and "adapter-centered" autobiographical Shakespeare can be found in China, as is clearly demonstrated by Lin Zhaohua's Shakespeare productions.¹⁵ Lin and his "autobiographical" counterparts in Taiwan reflect the influence of an important postwar theatrical movement in the West that underscores the director's role as the representative or interpreter of the script, as advocated by Jan Kott and Bertolt Brecht.¹⁶

Under this Western influence, personal interpretation and rendition of the play seems to be stressed by Lin Zhaohua 林兆华 above all other considerations. Usually addressed as *dadao* 大导 (big director/Maestro) by his colleagues and journalists, Lin is famous for his insistence on a director-centered working style and "the second theme"

factories or workshops as *shanzhai* factories and what they produce as *shanzhai* products. In this case, however, *shanzhai* refers to grassroots folks or the amateur artists who have had no professional training yet playfully imitate professionals.

¹³ This is an important issue worth addressing at fuller length. The micro vista is enormously phenomenal in China nowadays. To take Sina Weibo 新浪微博 (micro blog) for example, launched by Sina corporation on 14 August 2009, it has 503 million registered users as of December 2012. About 100 million messages are posted each day on Sina Weibo <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sina_Weibo> (30 July 2017). Such amazing growth of micro function is boosting and backing up more "small time" practices.

¹⁴ Huang is mainly concerned with two Taiwanese productions, Lee Kuo-hsiu's *Shamlet* (1992, revived in 1994, 1995, 1996, and 2000) and Wu Hsing-kuo's *Lear Alone* 李爾在此 (2001-2004) in several works on "autobiographical" Shakespeare.

¹⁵ Lin has directed three Shakespeare plays so far: *Richard III* 理查三世 (2001, 2004), *Coriolanus* 大将军寇流兰 (2007), and *Hamlet* 哈姆雷特 (1990, 1994, 2008)

¹⁶ As scholar Dennis Kennedy observes, "despite their substantial differences, both Brecht and Kott countenanced the modernist inclination for Shakespeare in that they proposed that the director control and shape theatrical meaning" (1993: 14).



created by the director. In Lin's directing career, he has developed his own directing methodology called "*shuangchong jiegou* 双重结构 (dual structure)", which means a director should establish a "second theme" in addition to the first theme provided by the playwright. For example, his second theme in *Hamlet* is: "everyone is Hamlet"¹⁷ and in *Richard III* is "those who lack vigilance against murder are the murderer's accomplices."¹⁸ Of course, Lin's persistence in pursuing personal style has stimulated creativity in his works. For example, regarding the gravediggers in *Hamlet* (see Image 1): their original lines in Act V were creatively distributed to different points throughout the play.¹⁹ In this way, the gravediggers fulfill a role similar to the chorus in an ancient Greek drama, commenting on the events occurring on stage, provoking the audience into thought, giving coherence to the structuring of the play, and in some cases providing comic relief.



IMAGE 1. One gravedigger in *Hamlet* (1990) directed by Lin Zhaohua

¹⁷ This is stated in the house programme of *Hamlet*: "Hamlet is one of us. You may pass by him on a street corner without recognizing him. The thoughts that used to torture him also torment you. The choice he has to make is also the one you face every day."

¹⁸ Lin further expounds the second theme in this production: "That conspirators kill and harm others is not frightful. What is really fearful is people's insensibility and ignorance toward these conspiracies. This happens frequently in our daily life. You are unaware of those – maybe good friends or colleagues of yours – who scheme on you, yet you treat them as your best friends. The insensate attitude toward intrigues actually helps extend them. In this sense, the victim is in fact the accomplice of the plotter." (Zhang 2003: 130).

¹⁹ The gravediggers appear in the following places in this production: an overture added at the outset of this production ("Hello... Let me ask thee a question..." to "fetch me a stoup of liquor... Ay, it's indeed true!"), the beginning of Act II ("Not working...you know what? I got a work" to "this world to drown or hang themselves, more than their even Christian"), Act IV (Gravedigger B: "look at this, it might be the pate of a politician...it'd be better to mind / our own business"), and Act V ("Let me ask thee a question... grave-makes...[interaction with Hamlet]...this same skull, / sir, was Yorick's skull, the king's jester"). The above English lines are extracted from the bilingual program of *Hamlet 1990* by Lin Zhaohua Theatre Studio.



Lin has also been known to challenge official and institutionalized “big-time” theatre. In an interview with culture.ifeng.com,²⁰ he observed scathingly that most intellectuals in China today have been submissive to the government (or in his own words, they have “zhao’an 招安” – literally “made peace with and pledged loyalty to the ruler”). In a somewhat subtle way, political implications are hidden in almost every one of his productions: the first version of *Hamlet* in 1990 may suggest a post-1989 depression and lethargy; *Richard III* could be a reminder of numbness experienced by people during the Cultural Revolution;²¹ *Coriolanus* addresses the increasing conflict between elites and masses in contemporary China.

The formalistic creativity and political implications in Lin’s works are laudable indeed; however, they are also highly controversial due to their lack of accessibility to the ordinary Chinese audience. It is also true that Lin’s egotistical stress on the director is often at the expense of the author and the audience. His adaptations are based on Chinese translations of Shakespeare and sometimes fail to demonstrate a thorough understanding of Shakespeare’s original plays, and thus often baffle the public. Lin has a great ability to grasp the gist of a play and often abstracts and conceptualizes characters’ actions and speeches, but, unfortunately, he seems to ignore the fact that theatre is a visual art and people attend performances to watch and enjoy rounded characters involved in dramatic conflicts rather than seeking instruction in profound metaphysical matters. In Lin’s Shakespeare adaptations, especially *Richard III* and *Hamlet*, the internal logic and texture of actions suffer greatly from dazzling formalism, characters are rendered like codes in a symbolic system and controlled like chessmen on a chessboard, and language loses its clarity and complexity. In the words of Shen Lin 沈林 “Lin’s [...] production reduced speeches to unconnected words and characters to unconnected bodies” (2010: 228). Neither do Lin’s works seem to take the accessibility of ordinary audiences into sufficient consideration. In a rather Hamletian way, he values the response of a small number of “the judicious” more than that of the large mass of “the unskillful”, “a whole theatre of others.” As one of his most loyal actors and friends, Pu Cunxin 濮存昕, puts it, “He [Lin] is too *xiaozhonghua*.²² He wishes to stick to his elitism to fulfill his dramaturgy; but this is very difficult because theatre itself is simply popular.”²³ Thus, while *Shamlet* and *Lear Alone* proved “immensely popular” in Taiwan and internationally, as described by Alexander Huang, Lin’s works

²⁰ See <<http://culture.ifeng.com/niandaifang/special/linzhaohua/>> (30 July 2017).

²¹ The most striking scene with political innuendos is the scene of “enthroning”, in which Richard stood on top of a movable elevator, holding a loudspeaker, saying words to pretentiously decline but actually invite the virtual crown, and waving his hand and blowing kisses to the masses who yelled “long live the King!” This political caricature poignantly reminds the audience of similar scenes in reality in the history of China.

²² *Xiaozhonghua*, 小众化 in Chinese, which literally means “serving a small, selected audience”, is more or less equivalent to “elitist”.

²³ Pu makes this comment in a documentary produced by CCTV named *People* included in *The audio record of Gouwo dubai* 狗窝独白 read by Lin himself, which is included in *Works by Lin Zhaohua* (DVD), 2009, Beijing Culture and Art Sound & Image Publishing House, Beijing.



were confined to a relatively small audience, because, if Huang's claim is true, it is far from the case in Mainland China that "Shakespeare had become a familiar text and an appealing cultural commodity to audiences [of *Shamlet* and *Lear Alone*]" (Huang 2004: 204). After all, as Desmet argues, the successes of "avant-gardiste productions [...] rely on their audience's prior knowledge of a Shakespeare text" (1999: 5). Either because Lin overestimates the Chinese audience's (or, frankly, even his own) prior knowledge of the Bard or because he simply chooses to ignore this factor, his "autobiographical" Shakespeare fails to step out of a somewhat narcissistic arena and reach the general public. By contrast, the author shall next discuss the second category of "small-time" Shakespeare which places more stress on audience's accessibility.

3. ANTHROPOLOGICAL SHAKESPEARE

The second category of small-time Shakespeare is "anthropological". The term "anthropological" is borrowed from Stephen Purcell's *Popular Shakespeare: Simulation and Subversion on the Modern Stage* (2009), in which the author views the "anthropological" as an important trait of "popular theatre", emphasizing the stem meaning of "popular" in its Latin root – *populus* ("the people"); for him, "popular theatre" is "anthropological" in the sense that it is "a theatre of the people, speaking to them in their own idioms, voicing their own concerns, representing their own interests" (Purcell 2009: 10). Purcell also maintains that anthropological theatre is most concerned "with the widest reach of audience available at a given moment or place" (10), and thus it is socially inclusive and encompassing rather than exclusive (11).



IMAGE 2. The makeshift stage surrounded by enthusiastic migrant workers watching *Romeo and Juliet* (2006) performed by student actors in Beijing



One special performance best exemplifies this type of small-time Shakespeare: *Romeo and Juliet* directed by Jiang Zejin 蒋泽金 and acted by students from the South (Nanjing) College of Communication University of China (CUC) in 2006. Originally, it was a production for the 2006 Chinese Universities Drama Festival held in Beijing. On three consecutive nights from 17 to 19 August 2006, CUC's *Romeo and Juliet*, as a special arrangement of the festival, was mounted on a makeshift stage in the square in front of the Chaoyang Cultural Center 朝阳区文化馆 and performed especially for migrant workers (see Image 2). These unusual performances proved a phenomenal success, attracting about one thousand migrant workers and local neighbourhood residents every night. The gathering crowd grew so big on the performance dates that the traffic police had to send reinforcements to the site to maintain order.²⁴

Although this production was tailor-made for migrant workers, Jiang and his student actors did not condescendingly simplify Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* in order to cater to the presumed "lower" comprehension of the audience; instead, they trusted the Bard's universality and faithfully rendered this tragedy in two hours (adopting Zhu Shenghao 朱生豪's translation), by highlighting three selected scenes: the balcony meeting, the morning departure, and dying for love. In an interview with China Radio International (CRI) on the performance night, one student from CUC said, "I think it is an honor for us university students to share some treasured cultural resources with workers from the countryside. As drama-loving students, we do not deliberately choose a special audience, but intend to bring true art to every ordinary person."²⁵ Quite encouragingly, the students' performance received enthusiastic and appropriate responses from the audience. As Xu Wei 徐伟, dean of the Chaoyang Cultural Centre, observed, "The migrant workers expressed their love and understanding of this play; almost none of them left before the performance was ended; some of them were too captivated by the play to leave even after it had ended".²⁶ The student actors were also excited about such an appreciative audience. One actor made this remark after the performance: "At first I was also a bit worried, but when I heard their enthusiastic applause, I felt a special sense of achievement."²⁷ Another actor described the surprisingly impressive response from the migrant workers in the audience, saying: "They had a very plain and unaffected manner in watching our performance, shouting and applauding when they felt excited; laughing when they found it amusing, every response spontaneously made from the bottom of their hearts."²⁸ Most of the migrant workers in the audience were unfamiliar with Shakespeare, yet their spontaneous responses to the performance proved their

²⁴ See a detailed description of the spectacular scene at <http://www.xiju.net/view_con.asp?id=2927> (30 July 2017). As for examples of reports by the media, see one on *People's Daily* (overseas version) and another [one] by China Radio International at <<http://gb.cri.cn/1321/2006/08/28/542@1192230.htm>> (30 July 2017).

²⁵ See <<http://gb.cri.cn/1321/2006/08/28/542@1192230.htm>> (30 July 2017).

²⁶ See <<http://gb.cri.cn/1321/2006/08/28/542@1192230.htm>> (30 July 2017).

²⁷ See <<http://gb.cri.cn/1321/2006/08/28/542@1192230.htm>> (30 July 2017).

²⁸ See <<http://gb.cri.cn/1321/2006/08/28/542@1192230.htm>> (30 July 2017).



understanding, receptivity to the play and yearning for Shakespeare. As journalist Xia Yupu 夏宇璞 vividly describes,

Several hundred dark-complexioned, bare-armed and slippered migrant workers were spreading everywhere all over the square: under the [makeshift] stage, on the steps to the stage, on the railings by the streets [in a distance...]. Some gaping in wonder, some locking their eyes steadily on the performance, as if completely immersed in the emotional ups and downs of the characters [...]. Xiao Cui, a youth from Inner Mongolia and now working as a cleaner at Huang Zhuang, Beijing, told the reporter, "I came here by bus. After I watched the performance last night, I wanted to see it again. The scene when Romeo drinks the poison was really touching!" (Xia 2006)

Such enthusiastic and unaffected responses to the Bard have been long missing in contemporary Chinese theatres. According to Jiang Zejin (2010), director of this square performance of *Romeo and Juliet*, there are now two prevalent trends: "one is a blind pursuit of postmodernism, abruptly hijacking the approach of 'deconstructing classics and subverting traditions'; the other is a pompous 'rich men's' drama;" as a result, theatres have become a privileged and prohibitive place. To resist the influence of these two trends, Jiang calls for a "square drama", as represented by this *Romeo and Juliet*.

This special production, in the author's view, embodies the true spirit of "anthropological" Shakespeare: Shakespeare for ordinary people. "People" here was no longer a politicized and ideologized concept, but was returned to its root meaning. It is especially significant to stress this point in contemporary China for three reasons: first, unlike most western countries, general literacy regarding Shakespeare and accessibility to his work remains understandably inadequate and limited in China, a country thousands of miles away from Europe and with very different cultural traditions; thus to increase this accessibility is of vital consequence. Second, by focusing on the reception of "the broad masses," the "anthropological" Shakespeare is in this sense an antidote to an already rigid official or institutionalized Shakespeare; thus the promotion of popular/small-time Shakespeare will bring the Bard a wider audience and therefore give rise to a more diverse and dynamic reception of Shakespeare. Third, this people-centered concern in theatre reflects either directly or indirectly a growing democratic awareness and appeal in public and political life in Mainland China today.

4. CONCLUSION

Therefore, we can conclude that in an ongoing evolution of Shakespeare from the "big-time" to the "small-time" in today's Mainland China, there are two major forms of the "small-time" – "autobiographical" and "anthropological"; so far as the particular socio-economic and cultural conditions are concerned, the "anthropological"



Shakespeare better fits [in with] the Chinese context and better serves the ordinary audiences than the “autobiographical” approach. In addition, it is important to add three points: first, there are some latent pitfalls in advocacy for the “anthropological”, due to the fact that this term is based on a rather vague and dubious concept of “people”. Individuals tend to interpret the word “people” from different perspectives and even manipulate it with clichés such as “in the name of people”, as do the two tribunes Brutus and Sicinius in *Coriolanus*. To distinguish the true popular/anthropological from the false, it should be understood that the former is rooted in people and initiated from below while the latter is often created by either the government or politicians and imposed from above. Second, there exists a common misunderstanding or deliberate misinterpretation that equates “accessibility” with reduced or compromised substance and quality. This is a phenomenon of which we should be wary, because once Shakespeare is deprived of his language, dramaturgy, and humanism, what remains is nothing but an exploitable name and iconic image and the “accessibility” becomes a mere pretext. Third, given a more mature environment, the “autobiographical” Shakespeare can be received more effectively; only then can the combination of both the “autobiographical” and the “anthropological” Shakespeares define the “small-time” Shakespeare in a clearer and richer sense.

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